

(19)



Europäisches Patentamt

European Patent Office

Office européen des brevets



(11)

EP 0 817 298 A1

(12)

EUROPEAN PATENT APPLICATION

published in accordance with Art. 158(3) EPC

cited in the European Search
Report of EP99107420.4
Your Ref.: P-20161/EP

(43) Date of publication:

07.01.1998 Bulletin 1998/02

(51) Int. Cl.⁶: H01M 8/04, H01M 8/06

(21) Application number: 97900428.0

(86) International application number:

PCT/JP97/00069

(22) Date of filing: 16.01.1997

(87) International publication number:

WO 97/27637 (31.07.1997 Gazette 1997/33)

(84) Designated Contracting States:

DE FR

(30) Priority: 22.01.1996 JP 8127/96

(71) Applicant:

MATSUSHITA ELECTRIC INDUSTRIAL CO., LTD.
Kadoma-shi, Osaka 571 (JP)

• GAMOU, Takaharu

Fujidera-shi, Osaka 583 (JP)

• MORITA, Yoshio

Suita-shi, Osaka 565 (JP)

• HATOH, Kazuhito

Daito-shi, Osaka 574 (JP)

(72) Inventors:

• KURANAKA, Sou

Osaka-shi, Osaka 536 (JP)

(74) Representative:

Grünecker, Kinkeldey,

Stockmair & Schwanhäusser

Anwaltssozietät

Maximilianstrasse 58

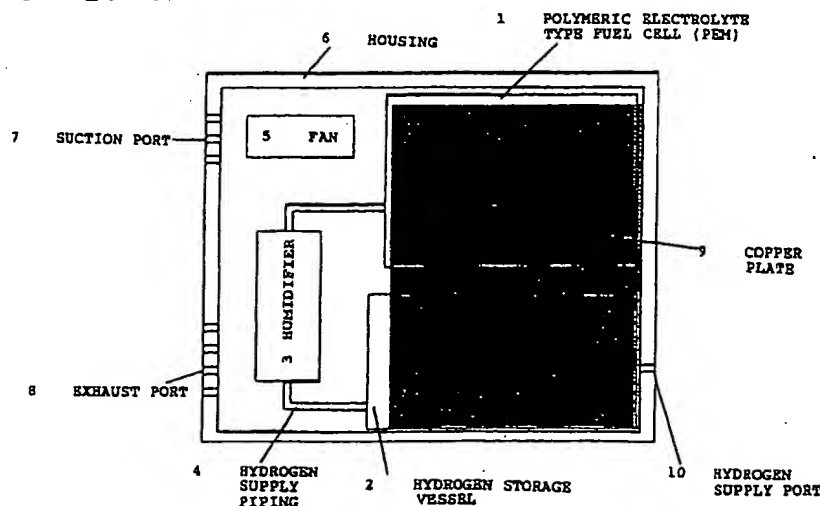
80538 München (DE)

(54) FUEL CELL SYSTEM

(57) When a polyelectrolyte type fuel cell which is actuated at about 60 °C is used, heating with an exhaust gas is difficult. Therefore, a polyelectrolyte type fuel cell (PEM) is used as a fuel cell main body and a metallic hydrogen storing container storing hydrogen is connected to the PEM with a hydrogen pipe through a humidifying device for humidifying the electrolytic film of the PEM. The PEM and hydrogen storing container are

connected to each other through a heat conductor composed of a copper plate. Because of the copper plate, the heat generated from the PEM is transmitted to the hydrogen storing container and raises the temperature and pressure in the container. Therefore, hydrogen is supplied to the PEM in an excellent state.

Fig. 1



Description

Technical Field

This invention relates to a fuel cell system in which a fuel cell and hydrogen absorbing alloys are combined.

Background Art

In recent years, a fuel cell system in which a fuel cell and hydrogen absorbing alloys are combined has been used as a portable power source. Various constitutions of such a fuel cell system have been proposed (such as Japanese Patent Application Laid-Open Nos. 6-76848 and 6-60894).

Among these, as a typical conventional example, a constitution described in Japanese Patent Application Laid-Open No. 6-150955 will be described in detail referring to Figs. 9 and 10.

In these drawings, cylinders 32 filled with hydrogen absorbing alloys which supply hydrogen to a fuel cell 31 are contained in a housing 34 of a portable structure independent from a power source body 33 containing the fuel cell 31, and in this housing 34, exhaust gas introducing section 35 is provided so that exhaust gas produced by the fuel cell 31 passes around the cylinders 32.

In this example, since the housing 34 containing the cylinders 32 has a portable structure independent from a power source body 33, the size of the housing 34 can be increased without spatial limitation for the cylinders 32. Also, in order to supply hydrogen smoothly, exhaust gas from the fuel cell 31 is introduced around the cylinders 32 so as to increase the temperature and pressure of the tank.

As the second example, as Japanese Patent Application Laid-Open No. 4-181659 describes, there was a fuel cell system in which the equilibrium hydrogen pressure at the upper limit of the plateau region of hydrogen absorbing alloys as a hydrogen storage means is 10 atm or below under an ordinary pressure, in order to enhance the safety of fuel cell systems.

Incidentally, in conventional fuel cell systems, since the type which operates at a relatively high temperature of 170°C or above, such as a phosphoric acid type fuel cell, is used as the fuel cell body, cylinders were effectively heated by exhaust gas.

However, when a polymeric electrolyte type fuel cell operating at about 60°C was used for further reducing the size of fuel cells for the use of electric appliances such as personal computers, and for generating electric power for a long period of time, there was a problem that heating by exhaust gas was difficult.

Furthermore, if the temperature of a hydrogen storage vessel in operation was not an ordinary temperature, and if the equilibrium hydrogen pressure at the upper limit of the plateau region of hydrogen absorbing alloys is 10 atm or below under an ordinary pressure,

there was problems that the equilibrium hydrogen pressure in operation elevated when the temperature was higher than the normal temperature, and that the equilibrium hydrogen pressure in operation lowered when the temperature was lower than the normal temperature and that hydrogen can not be supplied.

Disclosure of the Invention

It is an object of this invention to solve the problems described above, and to provide a small fuel cell system which can operate for a long period of time.

In order to solve the problems described above, the fuel cell of this invention comprises a fuel cell body and a hydrogen storage vessel which are linked together by a means that can supply and receive heat, such as a good conductor of heat.

This means that when the temperature of a hydrogen storage vessel in operation is an ordinary temperature or above, the supply and receipt of heat is to heat the hydrogen storage vessel with heat generated by the polymeric electrolyte type fuel cell body; and when the temperature of a hydrogen storage vessel in operation is an ordinary temperature or below, the supply and receipt of heat is to cool the polymeric electrolyte type fuel cell body by heat absorbed by the hydrogen storage vessel.

Furthermore, in addition to the main means that can supply and receive heat, a supplementary means that can supply and receive heat may be provided with a fan, whereby air is supplied to the fuel cell body.

The hydrogen storage vessel can be attached to or detached from the small system body.

Also, the equilibrium hydrogen pressure at the upper limit of the plateau region of hydrogen absorbing alloys in the hydrogen storage vessel is made 10 kg/cm²g or below at the temperature of this hydrogen storage vessel in operation.

Brief Description of the Drawings

Figure 1 is a first conceptual diagram of a fuel cell system which is a first embodiment of this invention.

Figure 2 is a second conceptual diagram of a fuel cell system which is a first embodiment of this invention.

Figure 3 is a perspective view of a hydrogen supply unit which is a second embodiment of this invention.

Figure 4 is a conceptual diagram of a fuel cell system which is a third embodiment of this invention.

Figure 5 is a first conceptual diagram of a fuel cell system which is a fourth embodiment of this invention.

Figure 6 is a second conceptual diagram of a fuel cell system which is a fourth embodiment of this invention.

Figure 7 is a conceptual diagram of a fuel cell system which is a fifth embodiment of this invention.

Figure 8 is a diagram showing the temperature dependency of the equilibrium hydrogen pressure of

AB2-type Ti(Zr)-Mn-based hydrogen absorbing alloys.

Figure 9 is a perspective (partially sectional) view of a prior art fuel cell system.

Figure 10 is a perspective (partially sectional) view of a prior art fuel cell system.

(Description of Symbols)

- 1 Polymeric electrolyte type fuel cell (PEM)
- 2 Hydrogen storage vessel
- 3 Humidifier
- 4 Hydrogen supply piping
- 5 Fan
- 6 Housing
- 7 Suction port
- 8 Exhaust port
- 9 Copper plate
- 10 Hydrogen supply port
- 11 Quick connector
- 12 Hinge
- 13 Screw
- 31 Fuel cell
- 32 Cylinder
- 33 Power source body
- 34 Housing
- 35 Exhaust gas inlet

Best Mode for Carrying Out of the Invention

Embodiment of this invention will be described below referring to Figure 1 through Figure 8.

(Embodiment 1)

Figure 1 and Figure 2 are conceptual diagrams of a fuel cell system which is a first embodiment of this invention. In Figure 1 and Figure 2, a polymeric electrolyte type fuel cell 1 (hereafter abbreviated as PEM) is adopted as a fuel cell body. Furthermore, a hydrogen storage vessel 2 made of a metal which stores hydrogen is connected to the PEM 1 by a hydrogen supply piping 4 provided with a humidifier 3 in the middle for humidifying the electrolyte membrane of the PEM 1. Also, there is a fan 5 for supplying air as an oxidant to the PEM 1, and these components are contained in a housing 6.

The housing 6 is preferably made of a plastic material of high heat insulation and excellent heat resistance so that the heat of PEM1 will not affect outside. Furthermore, the housing 6 has a suction port 7 and an exhaust port 8, and air is circulated by a fan 5. Therefore, the air passes through the vicinity of the PEM 1 and is heated. There is a supplementary effect that the heated air heats the hydrogen storage vessel 2. The hydrogen storage vessel 2 also has a hydrogen supply port 10 installed thereon.

Furthermore, the PEM 1 and the hydrogen storage vessel 2 are connected by a copper plate 9 as a con-

ductor of heat. This copper plate 9 can be substituted by other heat conductors such as an aluminum plate or a heat conducting sheet.

Also, by making the copper plate 9 of the same material as the hydrogen storage vessel 2, the hydrogen storage vessel 2 and the heat conductor can be of an integrated structure. By using such a structure, the conductivity of heat can be improved and the size of the system can be reduced.

Heat generated in the PEM 1 is transferred to the hydrogen storage vessel 2 through this copper plate 9, and elevates the temperature and pressure in the vessel. By this, hydrogen is well supplied to the PEM 1.

When hydrogen in the hydrogen storage vessel 2 is exhausted, hydrogen is supplemented through the hydrogen supply port 10.

In this constitution, since no supplementary heat sources are used such as a heater, the efficiency is improved.

Furthermore, since the PEM 1 is cooled by the endothermic reaction when the hydrogen absorbing alloys release hydrogen, no excessive heat is exhausted to exterior. Therefore, when used in electric appliances such as personal computers, there is an effect that heating by the system can be prevented.

If the copper plate is provided only on the central portion where temperature rise is large as Figure 2 shows, the effect of making heat distribution constant can be obtained.

In this embodiment, when the hydrogen storage vessel 2 is operated at a temperature higher than an ordinary temperature, the same action and effect can be obtained from the same constitution used when the hydrogen storage vessel 2 is operated at a temperature lower than an ordinary temperature.

(Embodiment 2)

Figure 3 is a perspective view of a hydrogen supply unit which is a second embodiment of this invention.

In Figure 3, the hydrogen storage vessel 2 has a quick connector 11 installed thereto, and can be connected to a hydrogen supply piping (not shown in Figure 3). Although this quick connector 11 is most preferred because of its simple handling, other attachable and detachable connecting means, such as a VCR connector may be used.

Further, a copper plate 9 which can be opened and closed using a hinge 12 and screws 13 encloses the hydrogen storage vessel 2 tightly. This copper plate 9 transfers heat generated by the PEM (not shown) in operation to the hydrogen storage vessel 2.

This copper plate 9 may be replaced by other conductors of heat such as aluminum plate as in the case of the first embodiment. Furthermore, the upper and lower parts of the copper plate 9 may be made attachable and detachable not only by the hinge 12 and screws 13, but by simple engaging or by an eyelet with a binder.

By the above constitution, only the hydrogen storage vessel 2 may be replaced when hydrogen in the hydrogen storage vessel 2 is exhausted. Therefore, effects such as the reduction of running costs, as well as decrease in the down time of the fuel cell system are obtained.

(Embodiment 3)

Figure 4 is a conceptual diagram of a fuel cell system which is a third embodiment of this invention.

In Figure 4, symbols same as in Figure 1 represent elements having the same names and functions as in Figure 1.

In this embodiment, the PEM 1 has almost the same size as the size of the hydrogen storage vessel 2, and the supply and receipt of heat is performed by the direct contact of the PEM 1 with the hydrogen storage vessel 2. By the above constitution, heat can be supplied and received efficiently and compactly without using a conductor of heat.

(Embodiment 4)

Figure 5 and Figure 6 are conceptual diagrams of a fuel cell system which is a fourth embodiment of this invention.

In these figures, symbols same as in Figure 1 represent elements having the same names and functions as in Figure 1.

In Figure 5, the hydrogen storage vessel 2 operates at a temperature higher than an ordinary temperature. An air cooling fan 16 first forces air introduced through the suction port 7 provided on the side of the PEM 1 as the figure shows against the PEM 1 to cool the PEM 1, and at the same time, gathers heat from the PEM 1 with the air, and heats the hydrogen storage vessel 2 using the heated air.

In Figure 6, the hydrogen storage vessel 2 operates at a temperature lower than an ordinary temperature. An air cooling fan 16 first forces air introduced through the suction port 7 provided on the side of the hydrogen storage vessel 2 against the hydrogen storage vessel 2 to heat the hydrogen storage vessel 2, and at the same time, gathers cool from the hydrogen storage vessel 2 with the air, and cools the PEM 1 using the cooled air. In this case, since the direction of air flow is opposite from the air flow from the fan 5 which supplies air as an oxidant to the PEM 1, a barrier 17 is provided to prevent mutual interference.

(Embodiment 5)

Figure 7 is a conceptual diagram of a fuel cell system which is a fifth embodiment of this invention.

In Figure 7, symbols same as in Figure 1 represent elements having the same names and functions as in Figure 1.

In this embodiment, the hydrogen storage vessel 2 is operated at a temperature higher than an ordinary temperature, particularly at almost the same temperature as the temperature of the PEM 1. In this case, although the costs increase, heat is supplied and received by a heat pipe 18. The heat pipe 18 is advantageous in that heat can be transferred even if the temperature gradient is small.

(Embodiment 6)

Figure 8 is a diagram showing the temperature dependency of the equilibrium hydrogen pressure of AB2-type Ti(Zr)-Mn-based hydrogen absorbing alloys. As the figure shows, in AB2-type Ti(Zr)-Mn-based hydrogen absorbing alloys, since the equilibrium pressure of hydrogen can be varied continuously by varying the composition (chiefly the Ti:Zr ratio), the pressure can be 10 kg/cm²g or below according to the operating temperature used.

In this way, the safety of fuel cell systems can be improved by selecting the most adequate hydrogen absorbing alloys while supplying hydrogen smoothly.

Possibility of Industrial Applications

According to this invention as described above, the hydrogen storage vessel can be heated efficiently even in polymeric electrolyte type fuel cells.

Moreover, the exhausted heat from the systems may be minimized.

If the hydrogen storage vessel can be attached to or detached from the main part of a small system, only the hydrogen storage vessel can be replaced for supplementing hydrogen. Therefore, effects such as the reduction of running costs, as well as decrease in the down time of the fuel cell system are obtained.

The safety of fuel cell systems is also improved.

Claims

1. A fuel cell system comprising a polymeric electrolyte type fuel cell body, a hydrogen storage vessel containing hydrogen absorbing alloys, a hydrogen supply piping for supplying hydrogen from said hydrogen storage vessel to said fuel cell, and a means which can supply or receive heat thermally connecting said fuel cell body and said hydrogen storage vessel so that heat can be supplied and received.
2. A fuel cell system as claimed in claim 1 further comprising a fan as a supplementary means which can supply or receive heat in addition to the main means which can supply or receive heat, said fan supplying air to said fuel cell body.
3. A fuel cell system as claimed in claims 1 or 2,

wherein the hydrogen storage vessel is a vessel attachable to and detachable from the main part of the system.

4. A fuel cell system as claimed in claims 1, 2, or 3, wherein the means which can supply or receive heat is a conductor of heat. 5
5. A fuel cell system as claimed in claim 4, wherein the conductor of heat is integrated with the hydrogen storage vessel. 10
6. A fuel cell system as claimed in any of claims 1, 2, or 3, wherein the means which can supply or receive heat is an air cooling fan. 15
7. A fuel cell system as claimed in any of claims 1 to 6, wherein the temperature of the hydrogen storage vessel in operation is an ordinary temperature or above, and the supply and receipt of heat is performed by heating said hydrogen storage vessel with heat generated by said polymeric electrolyte type fuel cell body. 20
8. A fuel cell system as claimed in claim 7, wherein the means which can supply or receive heat is a heat pipe. 25
9. A fuel cell system as claimed in any of claims 1 to 6, wherein the temperature of the hydrogen storage vessel in operation is an ordinary temperature or below, and the supply and receipt of heat is performed by cooling said polymeric electrolyte type fuel cell body with coolinnes generated by endothermic reaction of said hydrogen storage vessel. 30 35
10. A fuel cell system as claimed in claims 7 or 9, wherein the equilibrium hydrogen pressure at the upper limit of the plateau region of hydrogen absorbing alloys in the hydrogen storage vessel is 10 kg/cm²g or below at the temperature of said hydrogen storage vessel in operation. 40
11. A fuel cell system as claimed in claim 10, wherein the hydrogen absorbing alloys have an AB2-type Laves phase structure. 45
12. A fuel cell system as claimed in claim 1, wherein said means which can supply or receive heat has a structure wherein said fuel cell body contacts directly with said hydrogen storage vessel. 50

Amended claims under Art. 19.1 PCT

1 (amended). A fuel cell system comprising a polymeric electrolyte type fuel cell body, a hydrogen storage vessel containing hydrogen absorbing alloys, a hydrogen supply piping for supplying

hydrogen from said hydrogen storage vessel to said fuel cell, and a conductor of heat thermally connecting said fuel cell body and said hydrogen storage vessel so that heat can be supplied and received.

2 (amended). A fuel cell system as claimed in claim 1, wherein said conductor of heat is integrated with said hydrogen storage vessel.

3 (amended). A fuel cell system comprising a polymeric electrolyte type fuel cell body, a hydrogen storage vessel containing hydrogen absorbing alloys, a hydrogen supply piping for supplying hydrogen from said hydrogen storage vessel to said fuel cell, and an air cooling fan thermally connecting said fuel cell body and said hydrogen storage vessel so that heat can be supplied and received.

4 (amended). A fuel cell system comprising a polymeric electrolyte type fuel cell body, a hydrogen storage vessel containing hydrogen absorbing alloys, a hydrogen supply piping for supplying hydrogen from said hydrogen storage vessel to said fuel cell, and a heat pipe thermally connecting said fuel cell body and said hydrogen storage vessel so that heat can be supplied and received.

5 (amended). A fuel cell system comprising a polymeric electrolyte type fuel cell body, a hydrogen storage vessel containing hydrogen absorbing alloys, and a hydrogen supply piping for supplying hydrogen from said hydrogen storage vessel to said fuel cell, wherein said fuel cell body and said hydrogen storage vessel have a structure to directly contact to one another so that heat can be supplied and received.

6 (amended). A fuel cell system as claimed in any of claims 1 to 5, wherein in addition to said mechanism for thermally connecting said fuel cell body and said hydrogen storage vessel so that heat can be supplied and received, a fan is provided as a supplementary means for thermally connecting said fuel cell body and said hydrogen storage vessel so that heat can be supplied and received, said fan also supplying air to said fuel cell body.

7 (amended). A fuel cell system as claimed in any of claims 1 or 3 to 6, wherein said hydrogen storage vessel is a vessel having a structure attachable to and detachable from the main part of the system.

8 (amended). A fuel cell system as claimed in any of claims 1 to 7, wherein the temperature of said hydrogen storage vessel in operation is an ordinary temperature or above, and said supply and receipt of heat is performed by heating said hydrogen storage vessel with heat generated by said polymeric

electrolyte type fuel cell body.

9 (amended). A fuel cell system as claimed in any of claims 1 to 3 or 5 to 7, wherein the temperature of said hydrogen storage vessel in operation is an ordinary temperature or below, and said supply and receipt of heat is performed by cooling said polymeric electrolyte type fuel cell body with coolness generated by endothermic reaction of said hydrogen storage vessel.

10 (amended). A fuel cell system as claimed in claims 8 or 9, wherein the equilibrium hydrogen pressure at the upper limit of the plateau region of hydrogen absorbing alloys in said hydrogen storage vessel is 10 kg/cm²g or below at the temperature of said hydrogen storage vessel in operation.

11 (amended). A fuel cell system as claimed in claim 10, wherein said hydrogen absorbing alloys have AB2-type Laves phase structure.

25

30

35

40

45

50

55

Fig. 1

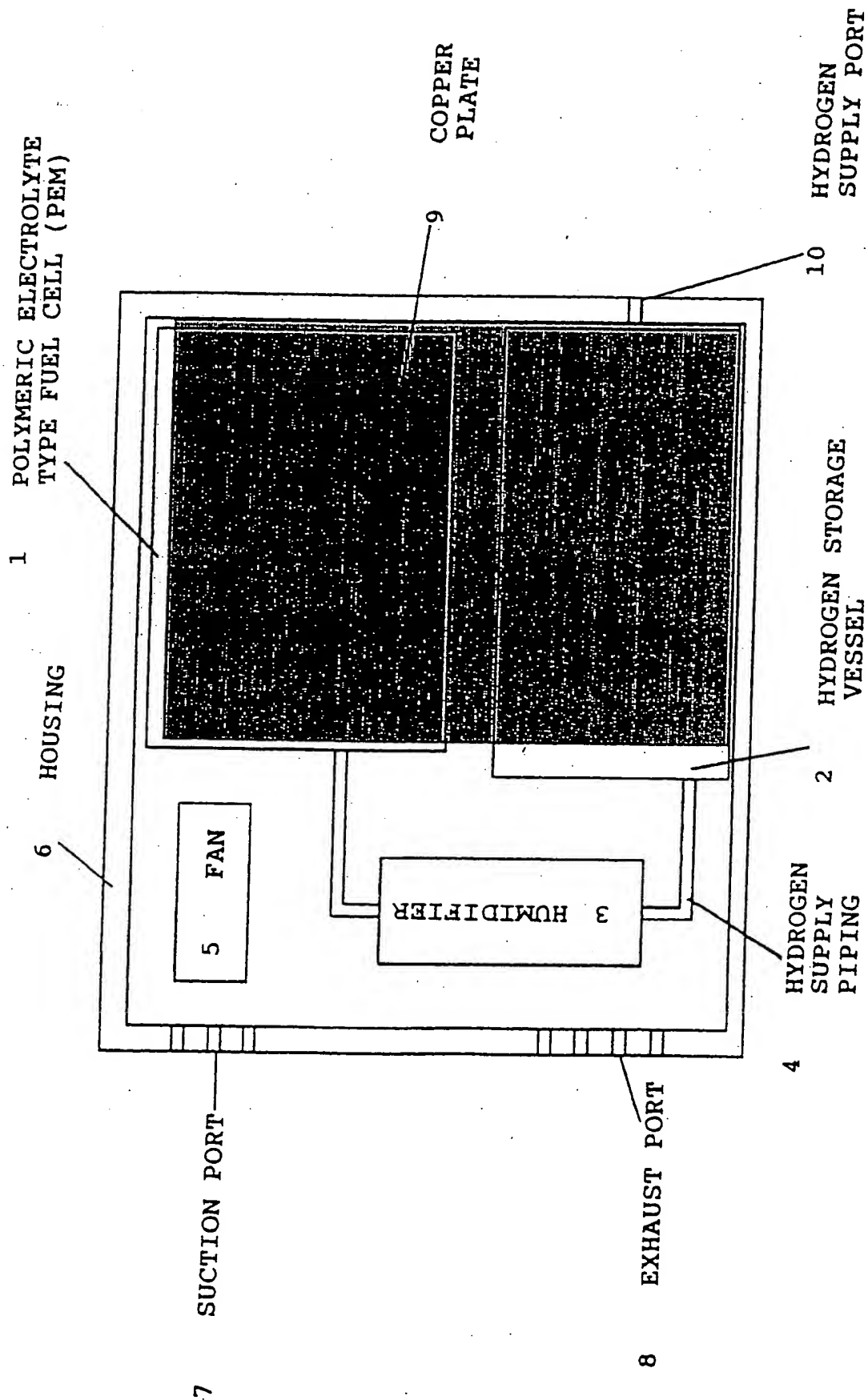
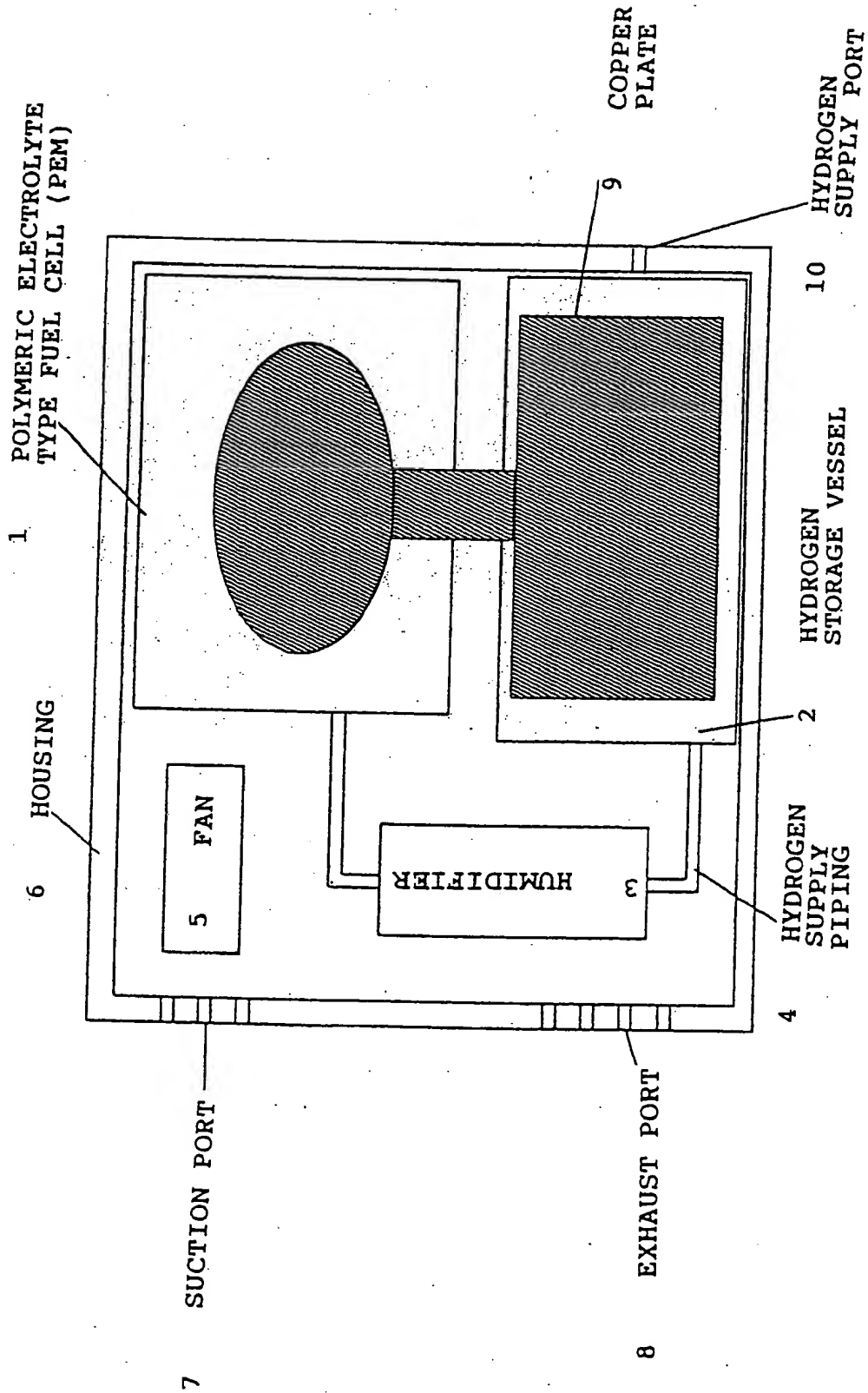


Fig. 2



F i g . 3

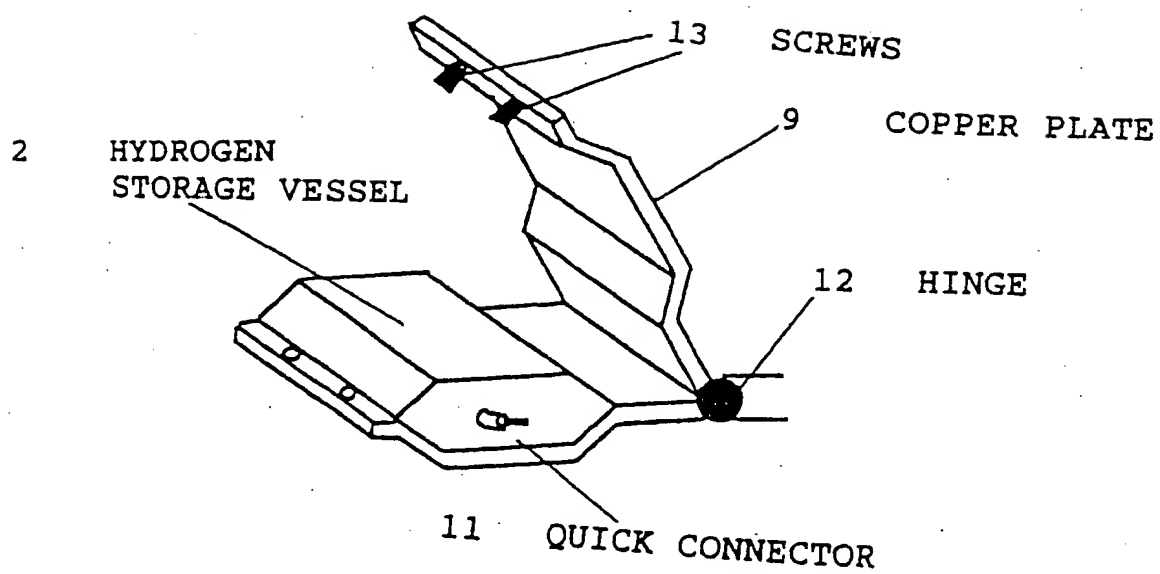


Fig. 4

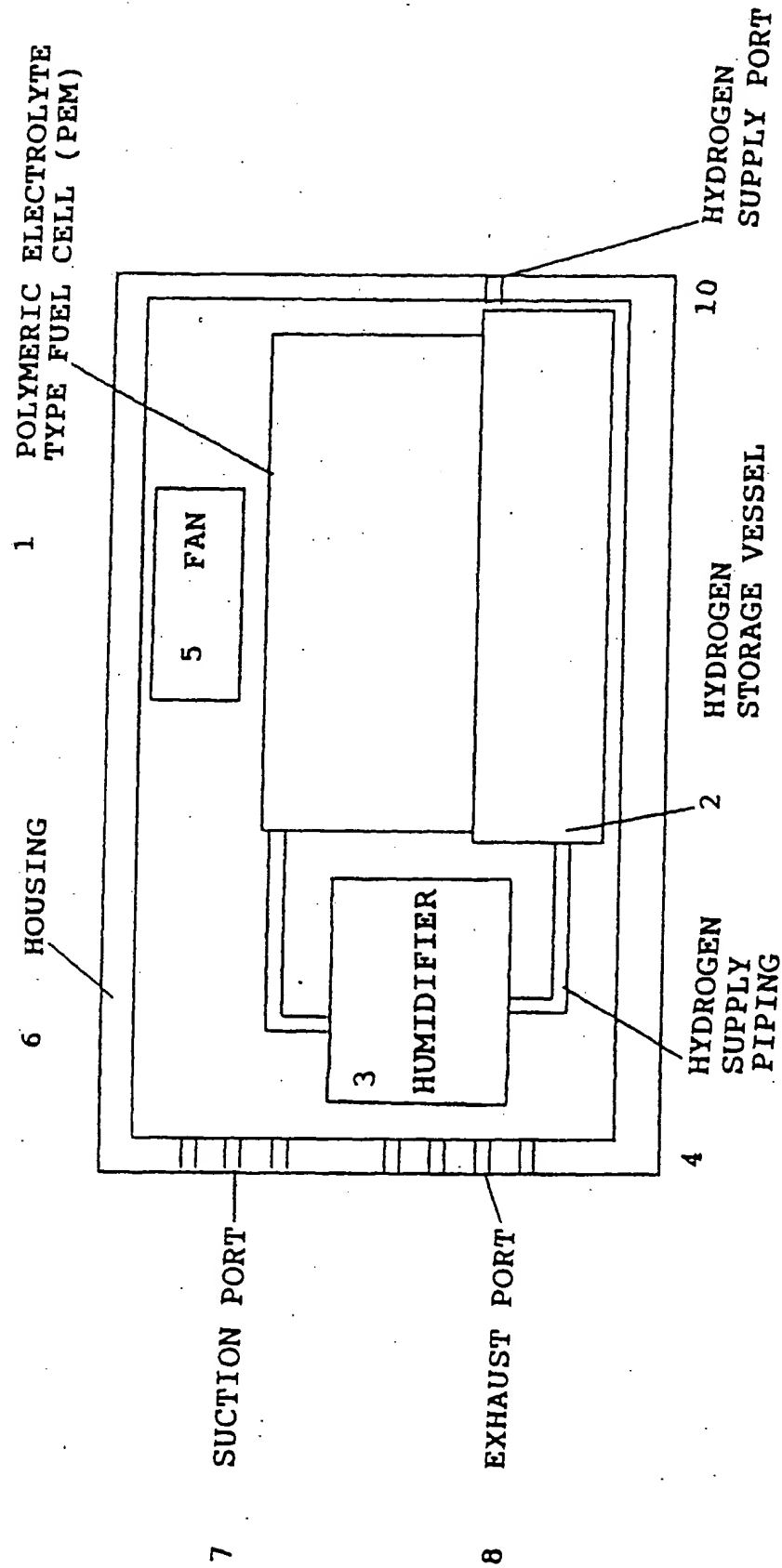


Fig. 5

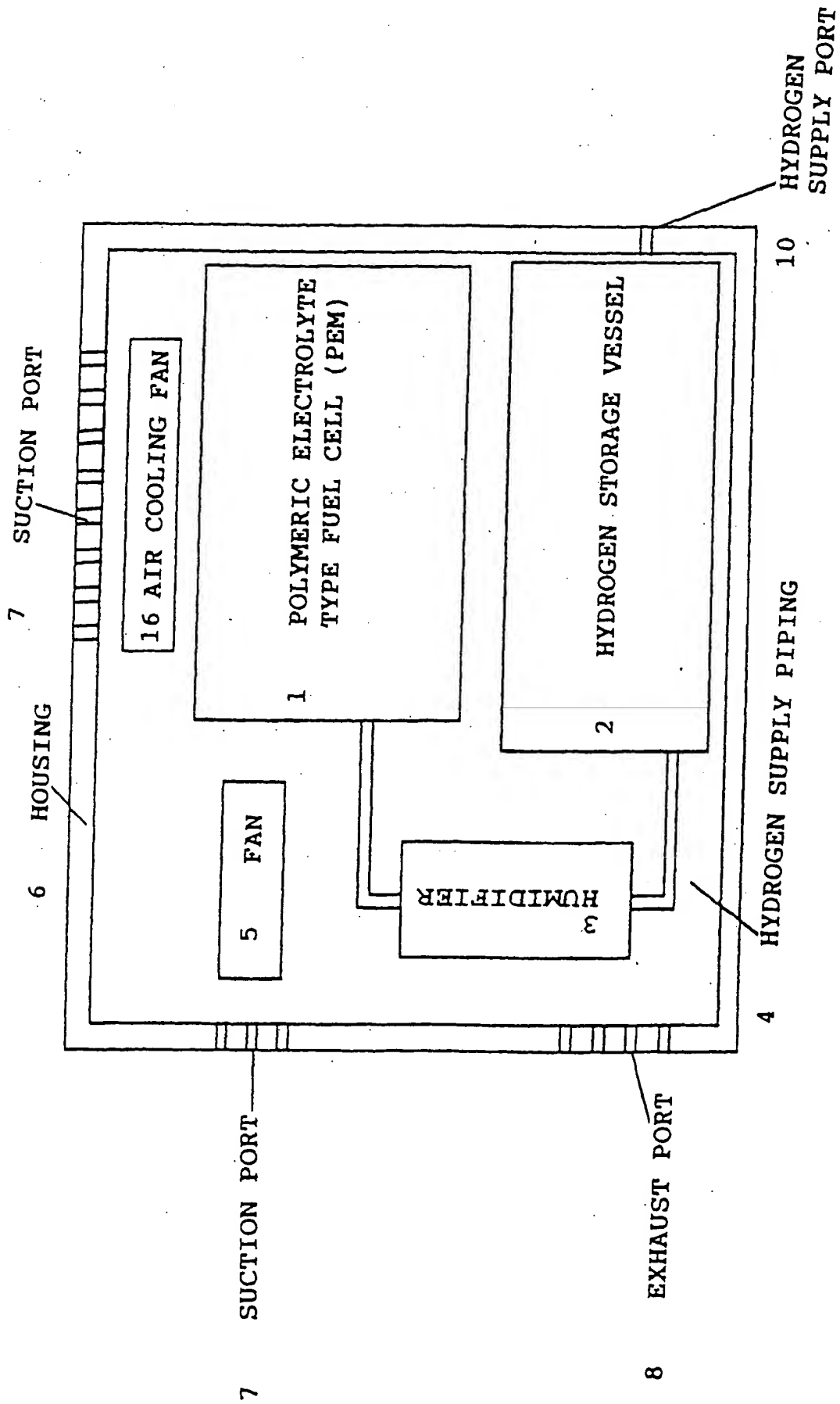


Fig. 6

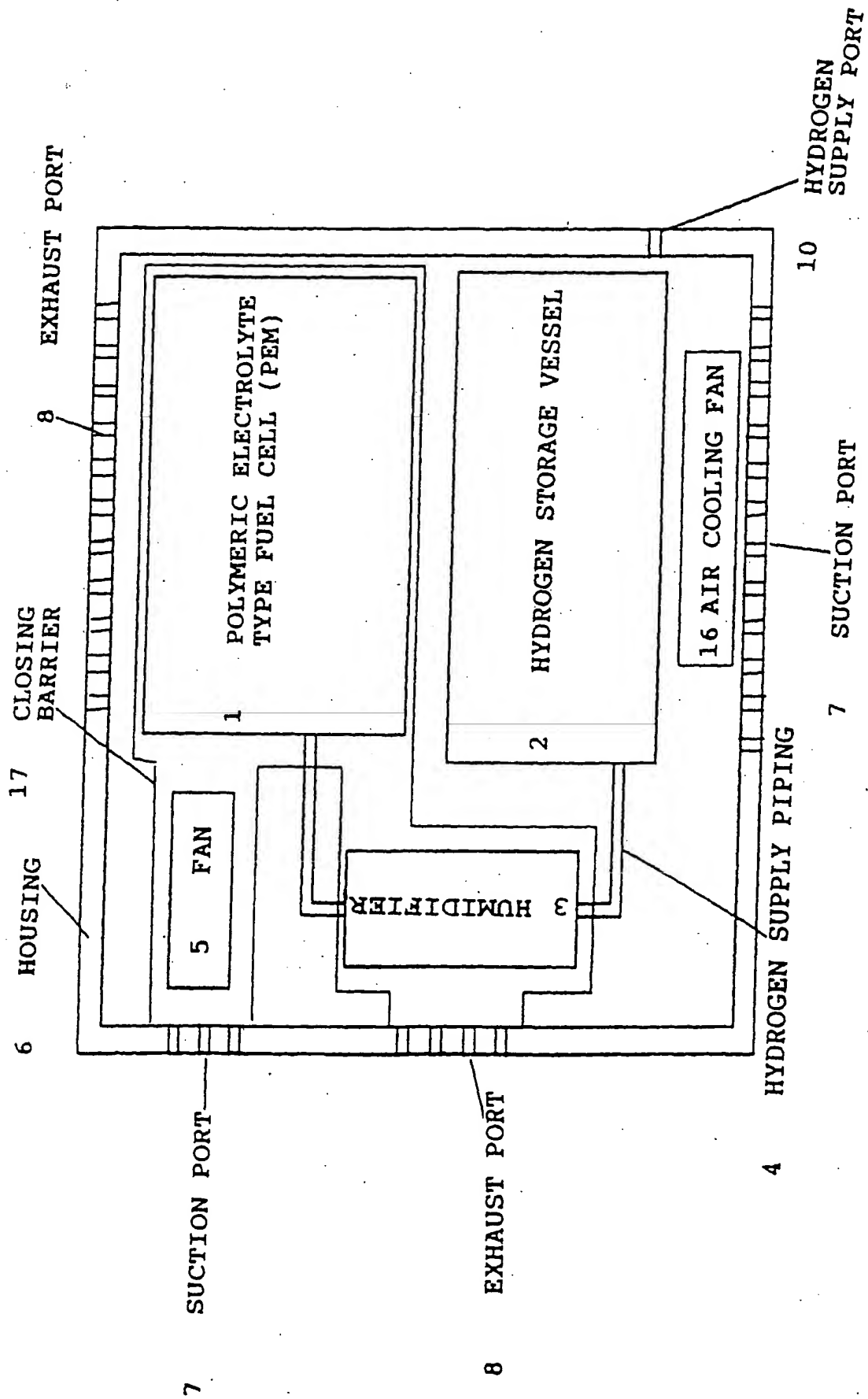


Fig. 7

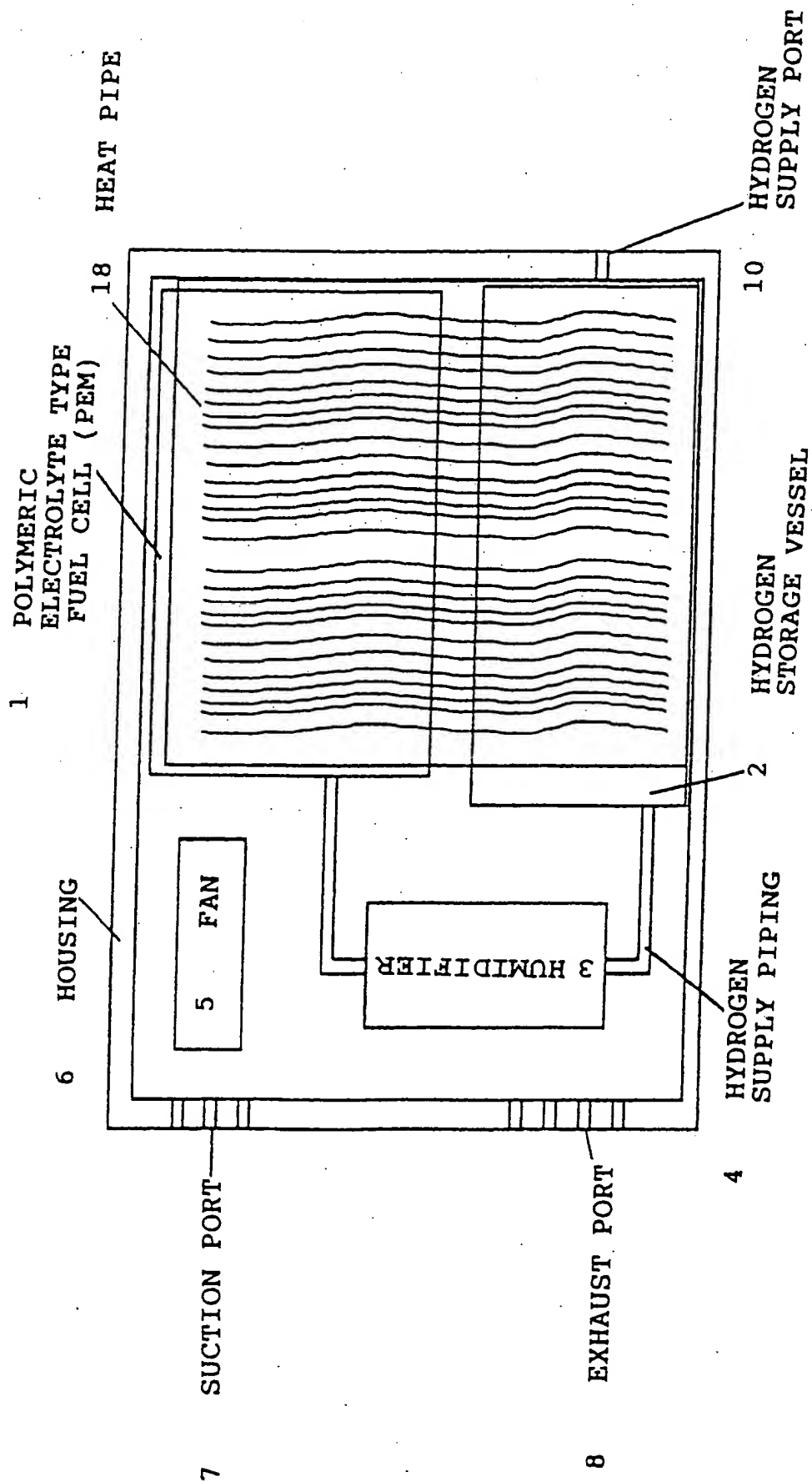
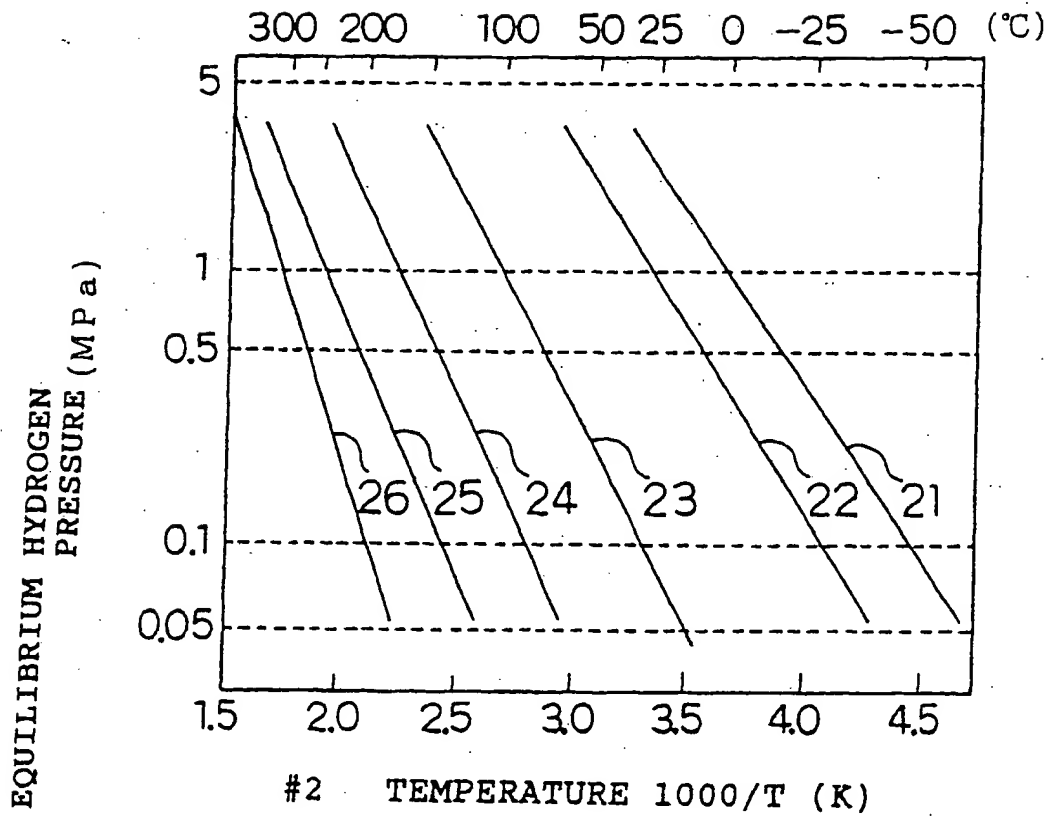


Fig. 8



21 : $\text{Ti Mn}_{0.6} \text{Cr}_{0.94}$

22 : $\text{Ti}_{0.8} \text{Zr}_{0.2} \text{Mn}_{0.8} \text{Cr}_{1.0} \text{Cu}_{0.2}$

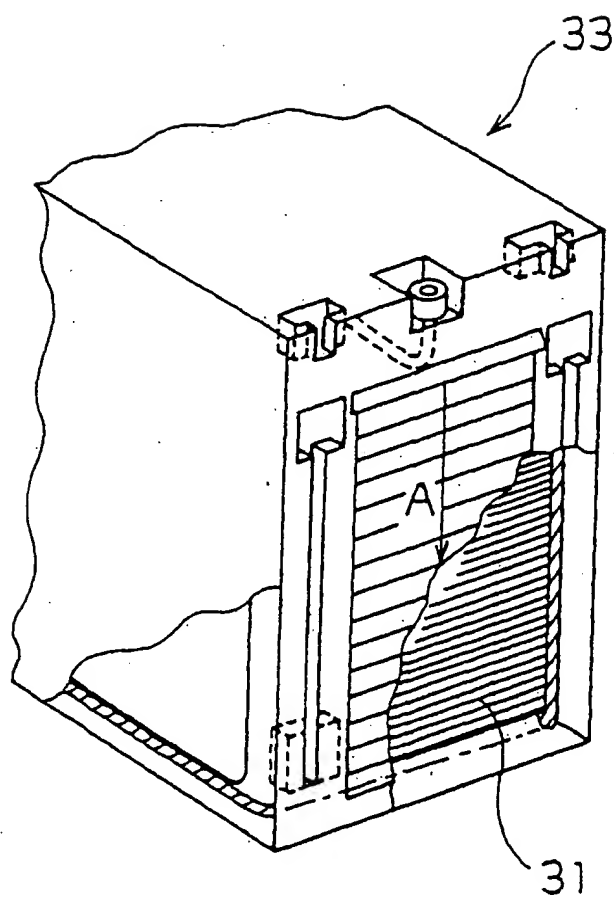
23 : $\text{Ti}_{0.6} \text{Zr}_{0.4} \text{Mn}_{0.8} \text{Cr}_{1.0} \text{Cu}_{0.2}$

24 : $\text{Ti}_{0.4} \text{Zr}_{0.6} \text{Mn}_{0.8} \text{Cr}_{1.0} \text{Cu}_{0.2}$

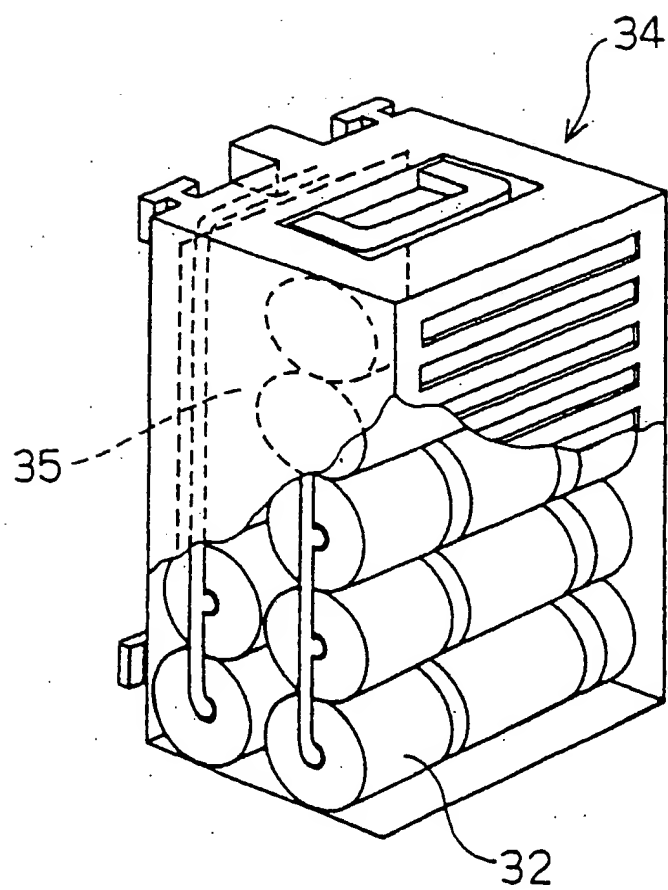
25 : $\text{Ti}_{0.2} \text{Zr}_{0.8} \text{Mn}_{0.8} \text{Cr}_{1.0} \text{Cu}_{0.2}$

26 : $\text{Zr Mn}_{1.5} \text{Cr}_{0.5}$

F i g . 9



F i g . 1 0



INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/JP97/00069

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

Int. Cl⁶ H01M8/04, H01M8/06

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

Int. Cl⁶ H01M8/04, H01M8/06

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Jitsuyo Shinan Koho	1926 - 1996	Jitsuyo Shinan Toroku
Kokai Jitsuyo Shinan Koho	1971 - 1997	Koho
Toroku Jitsuyo Shinan Koho	1994 - 1997	1996 - 1997

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
Y	JP, 06-84536, A (Sanyo Electric Co., Ltd.), March 25, 1994 (25. 03. 94), Column 6, lines 2 to 5; Fig. 2 (Family: none)	1 - 12
Y	JP, 02-170369, A (Toyoda Automatic Loom Works, Ltd.), July 2, 1990 (02. 07. 90), Claim (Family: none)	1 - 12
Y	JP, 06-76848, A (Sanyo Electric Co., Ltd.), March 18, 1994 (18. 03. 94), Column 2, line 47 to column 3, line 2 (Family: none)	3
Y	JP, 04-181659, A (Sanyo Electric Co., Ltd.), June 29, 1992 (29. 06. 92), Claim (Family: none)	10, 11

☐ Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.☐ See patent family annex.

* Special categories of cited documents:

"A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance

"E" earlier document but published on or after the international filing date

"L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)

"O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means

"P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed

"T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention

"X" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone

"Y" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art

"Z" document member of the same patent family

Date of the actual completion of the international search

May 26, 1997 (26. 05. 97)

Date of mailing of the international search report

June 3, 1997 (03. 06. 97)

Name and mailing address of the ISA/

Japanese Patent Office

Authorized officer

Facsimile No.

Telephone No.